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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the problem of how to introduce new forms of evaluation into school organization without a damaging loss of trust. The evaluators here are teachers engaged in curriculum policy evaluation within the schools in which they work. One way of conceptualizing and rooting contemporary activity under the label of school self-evaluation is to see it as the most recent stage in the evolution from a case study approach to evaluation of national curriculum projects to more collaborative processes of case study in which the primary audience is the subject/co-investigator. This model of evaluation derives from the concept of democratic evaluation, which posits the evaluator as a broker in the exchange of information between subjects who participate in all stages of decision-making over the inquiry. The workability of this model rests upon the possibility of dismantling the institution's value structure of privacy, territory, and hierarchy, and substituting the values of openness, shared critical responsibility, and rational autonomy. (BW)

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AGAINST THE RULES:

PROCEDURAL PROBLEMS IN INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION

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> 'Nobody wants to be evaluated by anybody at any time.'
> (House, 1973)

> 'Trust ... depends upon the predictability of personal and institutional behaviour ... and upon an awareness of shared goals.'
> (Nias, 1981.)

The quotation from House reminds us that evaluation is a mistrusted activity, the quotation from Nias that trust inheres in predictability. Staff who initiate evaluation activities in their own schools are seen to be breaking the rules and undermining the predictability of routinised relationships. This paper addresses the problem of now to introduce new forms of evaluation into school organization without a damaging loss of trust.

My argument is located within the field of educational evaluation and is concerned with the problems of establishing an emerging but still exploratory branch of evaluation - institutional self-evaluation. The evaluators I have in mind are teachers engaged in curriculum policy evaluation within the schools in which they work.

The scale of activity currently being promoted under the umbrella of institutional self-evaluation has accelerated dramatically in the United Kingdom over the last seven years (1977-1984). Academic conferences and in-service courses increasingly reflect the trend, many universities and colleges now include self-evaluation units in programmes of study, the Department of Education and Science (DES) has funded regional conferences, the Social Science Research Council and the Schools Council have supported research and development projects, while local district administrators have continued the initiative taken by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1977 of encouraging schools to evaluate themselves. By the end

of 1980 approximately three-quarters of the local education authorities in England and Wales had initiated discussions on school self-evaluation and one-fifth had issued guidelines for schools. By the end of 1981 this had increased to approximately five-sixths and one third respectively (Elliott, G., 1981). Within these years the Open University developed and published a course on Institutional Self-evaluation and Assessment (Open University, 1982), books and articles on the subject have burgeoned (see, for example, Shipman, 1981; Elliott, 1979; Simons, 1981; Eraut, 1983), as has an evaluation journal devoted almost entirely to the topic, The Journal of Evaluation in Education, 1982-84.

Although it is true to say that there is more talk than action it is also fair to claim that school self-evaluation has all the characteristics of a budding movement. Unfortunately one of these characteristics is confusion and contradiction, only some of it conveyed by a proliferation of labels.* At the heart of this confusion is a political conundrum, perhaps best expressed by posing the question, 'Is school self-evaluation a counter bid by threatened institutions to the increasingly coercive demands of government for a powerful say in the curriculum, or is it the successful outcome of an accountability movement initiated by government to make schools open to public scrutiny?'.

Clearly the popularity of school-self-evaluation indicates its susceptibility to differing ideological dispositions and, since schools are subject to all of them it is hardly surprising that their entry into this particular innovation is marked by some uncertainty and not a little incoherence. By definition self-evaluation must be carried out by those within the school but the questions of why, how, and for whom have become lost in a flurry of hasty involvement.

* These include school self-evaluation, school-level evaluation, in-school evaluation, school-based evaluation, school-focussed evaluation, school-centred evaluation, within institutions' evaluation, internal evaluation, insider evaluation, school self-assessment, school self-review, school self-study, self-report, self-monitoring.

Unfortunately this polarisation of self-evaluation rationales around the issue of curriculum control has tended to obscure its origins as a legacy of the curriculum development movement of the sixties, and an expression of the view that the most effective approach to curriculum development might lie in stimulating schools to review and develop their own practice.

I want to make it clear that my own interest in school self-evaluation stems from this curriculum development tradition, which preceded and arguably precipitated the accountability movement, and that my argument should not be construed as a response to accountability pressures. The concept of curriculum development as an intra-institutional process based upon self-evaluation is derived from my own participation in evolving a case study approach to the external evaluation of the national curriculum development projects of the sixties and seventies (Simons, 1971; MacDonald and Walker, 1976; Humble and Simons, 1978; MacDonald, 1978a; Simons, 1980a).

The perceptible difficulty and complexity of introducing, managing and sustaining innovation in schools evoked an evaluative focus on institutional instances as a means of gaining a more adequate understanding of the problems of change than was evident in the assumptions of sponsors and the strategies of developers of new curricula. Although this case study approach to evaluation flourished in the seventies as a cornerstone of a broader academic attraction towards naturalistic forms of investigation, its potential utility to those teachers who were subjected to its focus had also been established. MacDonald, whose prototype cases (see MacDonald 1978a) laid the foundation for later development, began to advocate more collaborative processes of case study in which the primary audience was seen as the subject/co-investigator. From this 'democratic' concept to the notion of autonomous self-evaluation is a transition which I have been advocating and exploring in a number of papers (see Simons, 1978; 1980b, 1981).

This is one way of contextualising and rooting contemporary activity under the label of school self-evaluation. An equally important source of impetus can be traced back to the James Report of 1972, with its emphasis on school-based in-service training and to another legacy of the curriculum development movement, the 'teacher as researcher' movement (see May 1981) stemming from the work and ideas of Lawrence Stenhouse (1975). The central thrust of these concerns with teacher education has been to promote professional growth through involvement in reflective analysis of classroom processes - a process I am here and above suggesting be extended to curriculum across the school.

For several years now I have been engaged as a teacher educator in supporting teachers and schools attempting within their own stitutions to promote evaluation-based development. As I have said, preparing accounts for outsiders is not the goal of these endeavours. The aspiration is simply to improve the educational experience of the pupils through a process of systematic continuous review of institutional provision. However the evaluation expertise I bring to this support and advice role is derived from a lengthy involvement in the role of external evaluator of externally conceived innovations, and the question is to what extent the procedural and methodological practices of outsider evaluation meet the needs of insider evaluation. The principles underlying these practices were developed in response to the technical and ethical problems generated by the presence of a stranger in the school with an evaluative mission. The procedures were designed largely to elicit the co-operation and trust of the 'resident' population, and thus secure the validity and fairness of the exercise.

I have previously argued (Simons, 1983) that the extensive and quasi-legal system of conventions developed in the context of external case study evaluation apply with at least equal force to the even more sensitive context of internal evaluation, and that their application would be sufficient to ensure that self-evaluation activities meet the criteria of trustworthiness enunciated by Nias and defuse the intrinsically threatening nature of the exercise. I now see the need to go much further, since it is clear to me that internal evaluation, if it is to serve professional development rather than managerial control, must challenge directly some of the fundamental rules of the institution. Schools are like clubs, and members must either obey the rules, or change them. Unlike the external evaluator, who may be given a temporary licence to personally infringe the rules in order to complete a one-off exercise, the internal evaluator must change the organization before the service can be effectively introduced. No teacher development without institutional development.

To speak of schools, or any other institutions, as clubs is hardly breaking new conceptual ground, but it does help to underline an important dimension of the kind of fact-finding, information handling process that institutional inquiry must introduce. Members of the club know what the rules are although they are never written down. They consist of such maxims as 'mind your own business', 'stick to your patch', and 'don't get ideas above your station'. These values, of privacy, territory and hierarchy, underpin the organizational structure of schools and act as constraints upon the apparently informal nature of most staff relationships. An evaluation exercise threatens to break such rules and one that is initiated by members themselves may be seen as a serious breach of long-established and widely accepted conventions. When we consider that evaluation is in any case an unwelcome activity and that such a breach means that internal evaluators begin with a deficit rather than a mere absence of the trust they require to carry out the study, then there is a prima facie case for

taking steps to secure the predictability and the shared goals of the evaluation. This calls for a change in the rules.

The model of evaluation which I have been developing, and the model of case study associated with it, derives from the concept of democratic evaluation (MacDonald, 1974) which posits the evaluator as a broker in the exchange of information between subjects who participate in all stages of decision-making over the inquiry from question raising to reporting. It was within this notion of evaluation that some basic rules for the conduct of evaluative case study were laid down and principles and procedures for access, data collection and reporting formulated (MacDonald and Walker, 1975; MacDonald and Stake, 1974). These principles and procedures were subsequently elaborated by other evaluators in the naturalistic tradition (Simons, 1978; Adelman, 1979; Kemmis, 1981) so that there is now a widely shared value system with some variation of procedures to fit particular cases.

The central difference between the external case study and the internal which provokes the need to review the procedures is, of course, the location and identity of the case worker. Unlike the external evaluator who is not a club member bound by its rules and who is only a temporary intruder on a one-off mission, the internal evaluator is a permanent resident. The information she proposes to gather will upset the existing distribution of institutional knowledge, and will remain within the school as a political resource of unpredictable consequence. Any mistakes made, any hostilities generated will have to be healed or lived with within the community. It is tempting for would-be in-house evaluators, sensitive to such pitfalls, to play down the significance of the innovation in engaging the co-operation of their colleagues, and to rely on their personal credibility. 'Trust me' they say. Such an approach is transparently a recipe for disaster but equally pathogenic, I would now argue,

is a straight adoption of case study practice in the democratic tradition. In order to substantiate this proposition it is necessary to analyse this practice in terms of its consonance with the maintenance of the institutional values of privacy, territory and hierarchy.

The democratic concept of case study was explored in an external framework by MacDonald, Walker and associates in tracing the impact of centrally developed projects upon individual schools several years after the project teams disbanded (MacDonald and Walker, 1974, 1976). The central principle underlying the process of these studies was that participants 'owned their own data'. Access to and exchange of such data could only be granted with their consent. Participants had control, in other words, over how much and what kind of information about themselves they allowed to become public. The two guiding procedural principles for gaining and disseminating information within and beyond the school were confidentiality and negotiation. For a discussion of the theory and practice of these principles see MacDonald and Walker, 1974, Norris, 1977.

Although it might seem that by definition the case study of an institution must transgress its internal boundaries, a close look at the democratic model reveals it as a variant characterised in its process by a high degree of respect for these boundaries. MacDonald, who originated the model, was centrally concerned with reconciling the public right to know with the individual right to privacy and protection (MacDonald et al, 1975). His solution was a broker role for the evaluator. In practice this meant treating the case as a cellular structure of privatised information, negotiating access and release of information with each individual guardian. It meant gathering much more knowledge of the case than was ever released, it meant much less ascription, particularly of judgment data, than was possible from the case records. Certainly it increased the flow and the nature of intra-institutional knowledge but

accorded to individual informants at different levels of the institutional power structure the right as members of that institution to determine the volume and content of that flow. Whilst the convention of confidentiality ensured that the evaluator would gain effective access to a privatised knowledge system the convention of informant control over release ensured that he would know much more than he could ever tell.

The critical point is that a straight application of such conventions to the internal evaluator would result in an immense empowerment of the evaluator qua member of the institution if the conventions are accepted, or an inoperable approach if the implications of acquiescence are apprehended. Only non-members can be brokers. It is quite clear therefore that internal evaluators cannot proceed on such a basis and that an alternative basis must be constructed. This alternative basis, I would argue, rests upon the possibility of dismantling the value structure of privacy, territory, and hierarchy, and substituting the values of openness, shared critical responsibility and rational autonomy. In the context of current accountability pressures on schools it is worth adding that such a radical change in organizational values calls for a corresponding degree of insulation. On this point MacDonald (1978b) has written of 'self-critical communities within high walls - groups who risk enough in collective self-reflection to be spared the added risk of continuous exposure to outside observation'.

The evidence we have to date of the exact procedures schools adopt in pursuing the aspirations of internal evaluation outlined in this paper is limited. By their very nature and intention many self-evaluations remain unrecorded or are not publicly available. The Open University Register (James, 1982) does however provide some indicators of how schools are proceeding to evaluate and the few documented detailed accounts that are available clearly endorse the function of formal procedures in pursuing

institutional self-evaluation aims. (See, for instance, Delves and Watts, 1979; Mitchell, 1983.)

That there is a need for formal procedures is most convincingly argued by Nias (1981) in her essay on trust, where she claims that two necessary conditions for trust are predictability and perceived agreement over ends. Behaviours can only become predictable and agreement over ends affirmed as one gains knowledge of them. For this, formal procedures are necessary.

> 'Trust, I have argued, depends upon the predictability of personal and institutional behaviour and of technical competence, and upon an awareness of shared goals. Yet in the educational system of a pluralist society there is bound to be conflict over the aims of education, and thus over the conduct of the schools (especially secondary comprehensive ones). To claim that this conflict can be resolved by mutual trust rather than by "formal procedures" is to be guilty of circularity. It is also to ignore the part played in the establishment of trust by forms of organization ...
>
> In other words, formal procedures and the interpersonal knowledge which they promote are not the anti-thesis of "trust" but the necessary conditions for it. Moreover, they act upon each other. Formal procedures facilitate the growth of trust and help to ensure its survival.'
>
> (Nias, 1981, p. 222.)

By formal procedures Nias means forms of organization built into the functioning of the school (e.g. heads of faculty meetings) or which routinize or give institutional recognition to existing informal arrangements (e.g. giving an informal staff group the name and status of a working party). (Nias, 1981, p. 212.)

The crux of the problem, evident in Nias's statement, is the reconciliation between 'shared goals' and 'conflict over aims'. Whilst one can agree with her, and I do, that formal procedures are an essential means of mediating disparate ideologies across a professional community, such procedures are not value-neutral. With respect to institutional self-evaluation the procedures should, indeed must, embody a consensual expression of the conditions of school development. In terms of my argument, therefore,

procedures for self-evaluation must embody the values of openness, shared critical responsibility and rational autonomy. Unless schools are prepared to face the fundamental reversal of institutional traditions that is clearly entailed by such a posture, and to commit themselves to a new concept of what John Elliott (1981) calls 'intra-professional accountability', then I do not believe that school self-evaluation can promote healthy forms of institutional development.

Strategies for development have to be related to breaking the rules which serve old values and establishing new ones. Privacy in one's teaching, assessing and curriculum planning have to give way to public documentation and analysis of theory and practice; departmental interests have to be considered in relation to broader curriculum concerns and educational critique; working relationships have to be deduced from autonomy-based accountability rather than power-based responsibility. These values - the exposure of individual work to collective critique within a framework of professional equality need to be underpinned by institutional processes which encourage their expression.

it possible that the schools we now have could evolve into self-developing communities of this kind by a deliberate, conscious process of cultural transformation? Perhaps not, perhaps in the end schools which set out on such a path may encounter obstacles to full realization that can only be overcome by re-negotiating with their employers and their communities the terms of governance that presently structure their powers and obligations. We will have to see, to experiment with the process in the full consciousness of the fundamental implications of what may lie ahead.

This 'full consciousness' is what is missing from current school self-accountability proposals, even those which aspire to promote professional development (Elliott, 1979; Sockett, 1980; Becher, Eraut and Knight, 1981).

Such proposals fail to acknowledge that the cultural assumptions of their advocacies do not match the values that are deeply embedded in the formal organization of schools. Yet we have enough evidence from the lessons of the curriculum reform movement of the sixties and seventies to know that we cannot simply leave institutions intact, make new demands of them, and expect to succeed.

School self-evaluation is conceptually a major innovation. I have argued that it directly confronts three major organizational values of schools - privacy, territory and hierarchy. It follows that it can only serve institutional development if it is predicated upon a commitment to fundamental institutional change. Such a commitment must constitute, for me, the 'shared goals' to which Nias alludes. Anything less will be revealed, sooner or later, as a cosmetic rhetoric disguising an unchanging reality. In this light, the particular procedures adopted by external evaluators have little relevance. They were designed to meet the needs of external audiences whilst minimizing the consequences for schools. Internal evaluators must devise procedures on the basis of a different logic - the ineluctable agenda of organizational change.

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